

February 4, 2009

Congress to Revisit Akaka Bill

Hawaii Sen. Daniel Akaka on Wednesday re-introduced a bill in the U.S. Senate that could lead to establishment of a federally recognized Hawaiian government.

A companion bill was introduced by Congressman Neil Abercrombie and Congresswoman Mazie Hirono in the U.S. House.

The bill, which is identical to one that was introduced in the House in 2000, has the support of Hawaii Sen. Daniel Inouye, a Democrat like Akaka, Hirono and Abercrombie.

The Akaka Bill, as it is known, passed the House twice but fell short of garnering enough support in the Senate. President Bush's administration also opposed the measure.

Sen. Akaka believes his bill now has a better chance under President Obama, a Democrat with Hawaii ties who has previously expressed his support for the bill, and in a Congress that increased its Democratic majority last year.

The Akaka Bill would begin a process to form a Native Hawaiian government that could negotiate with the state and federal government on behalf of Hawaii's indigenous people.

The bill would permit the Hawaiian government to participate in a government-to-government relationship with the United States similar to federal policies that apply to American Indians and Alaska Natives.

Opponents of the Akaka Bill have argued that it is unconstitutional because it discriminates on the basis of race. Some say passage of the bill also could lead to Hawaii seceding from the United States.

Hawaii's monarchy was overthrown in 1893, and the territory was annexed by the United States in 1898.

But supporters say the bill does not allow secession, nor the taking of private lands, the authorization of gaming or the creation of a reservation.

"This process is important for all people of Hawaii, so we can finally resolve the long-standing issues resulting from the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii and move forward together to provide a better future for the children of Hawaii," said Akaka, who

has Hawaiian ancestry. “We have an established record of the United States’ commitment to reconciliation with Native Hawaiians. This legislation is a necessary next step to build upon that foundation and honor that commitment.”

The Native Hawaiian Government Reorganization Act is supported by Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle, a Republican, and the Democrat-controlled Hawaii Legislature.

Organizations such as the **American Bar Association**, the Japanese American Citizen League and the National Indian Education Association support of the measure, as do the National Congress of American Indians and the Alaska Federation of Natives.